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Inglorious Passages: Noncombat Deaths in the American Civil War

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Review

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Wills, Brian Steel. *Inglorious Passages: Noncombat Deaths in the American Civil War*. University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 0700625089

In 2008, Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering* opened the way for what some scholars have since termed a "dark turn" in Civil War scholarship. Works by Lesley Gordon, Martha Hodes, Meg Groeling, and others have followed in this grim but enlightening vein, shocking modern readers out of their otherwise safe study of the war. Historian Brian Matthew Jordan has argued this darker, more complex approach properly considers the war "not as an *event*, but as a human *experience*"—and, despite the remove of more than a century and a half, an experience that can once again make us viscerally uncomfortable.

The latest contribution to this body of dark scholarship comes from Brian Steel Wills, *Inglorious Passages: Noncombat Deaths in the American Civil War* (University Press of Kansas, 2017).

"Not everyone who perished was destined to do so in lines of battle next to their comrades, while serving artillery pieces in batteries or fortifications, or while engaged in mounted or waterborne action against their enemies," Wills writes. "Even extracting the devastating effects of disease, the losses in noncombat experience were staggering and deeply felt on both sides of the Mason and Dixon line."

Wills' work itself is staggering. He catalogues such a multitude of deaths, in so many ways, that one cannot help but feel their collective weight. The sheer variety of those losses, meanwhile, resists any attempt to distill the dead into impersonal statistics. "Their loss, in the course of the warfare that engulfed their worlds, was as real to themselves and their family members and friends as if they had perished under the effects of shot and shell, minié ball, saber, or bayonet," Wills writes.

As he defines it, "noncombat mortality embraced all forms of death—soldier, civilian, and animal—not involving direct and deliberate fire between hostile or enemy forces, but related to the prosecution of, or circumstances surrounding, their engagement in the American Civil War."

No one expected, when they went off to war, that they'd be hit by a train or drown in a swimming hole—"mundane or even ignoble circumstances," Wills calls them.

Bad weather. Accidental firearm discharges. Ammunition explosions. Industrial accidents. Brawls. Murder. Suicide. Disease. In addition to fatal illnesses, Wills says, “misfortune, incompetence, mismanagement, and simple neglect were also responsible for the conditions that led to the unnecessary deaths of soldiers in noncombat situations.”

Sailors died from scaldings. Soldiers died from friendly fire. “[I]n the cavalry service, a large number of accidental deaths resulted from poor horsemanship,” Wills recounts.

Mule trappings. Shark attacks. Snake bites. “The alligators eat some soldiers,” one man reported, “but if the soldiers would keep out of the river they would not be eaten.”

Wills does his best to curate his collection into chapters that deal with death on the open ocean and inland waters, deaths associated with animals and mascots, affairs of honor, acts of God, civilians, and others. Each one offers a long series of short episodes detailing one deadly misfortune after another. The structure poses a narrative challenge for Wills, who does the best he can to stitch together so many disparate stories. Picture a box of index cards, each one containing the story of someone’s untimely death—that’s how the chapters read.

Wills gathered these stories from letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, and other primary sources from north and south over four years of war—an incredible feat of research endurance that only dawned on me slowly as the accounts piled up. He draws on official army records when possible, too, but cause of death didn’t always appear in Federal records and seldom in Confederate records.

Even more impressive than his research is Wills’ respectful treatment of the material. He relays these episodes objectively, avoiding sentimentality or sensationalism. In the end, his even approach allows the material to achieve its full weight and impact.

“‘Dying well’ was not only part of the ‘civic culture’; it was part of the personal culture for these soldiers, too,” Wills reminds readers. The tragedy, beyond the deaths themselves, was the senselessness of it. “[T]hose who perished in accidents or other mishaps, at the hands of friendly forces or by their own hands, in transportation or industrial accidents or simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time failed to offer that sense of meaning to their surviving comrades, friends, and families,” he points out.

Wills’ “dark scholarship” can be emotionally exhausting at times—death after death after death wears on one—but that only underscores the importance of the work. Death was “staggering and deeply felt” during the war, and in *Inglorious Passages*, it remains so today.

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